



YOUR VOICE FORT ST. JOHN COMMUNITY SURVEY

SUMMARY REPORT

DECEMBER 2018

COMMUNITY
DEVELOPMENT
INSTITUTE



THE FORGE
EXCHANGE • INNOVATE • IGNITE



FORT ST. JOHN
The Energetic City

Acknowledgements

The success of this project depended on the time, effort, and goodwill of the many residents who took the time to complete the survey. We would like to thank these residents for participating in the survey.

We would also like to express thanks to representatives and staff from the City of Fort St. John and to The Forge Advisory Committee who provided support and feedback on the survey and the survey process. We would also like to very much thank Jennifer Moore who coordinated the survey. The project could not have been completed without the help from our student survey team; Carlos Yu, Sage Felix, Jaskirat Kaur Gill, and Jaspreet Kaur.

It is our hope that the findings from this will project provide a fair and accurate reflection of the insight and guidance to the social and economic development of Fort St. John.

Organization of Reports

To enhance readability of the findings of this research, three separate reports have been developed. The reports from the “Your Voice Fort St. John” survey include:

- Summary Report
- Survey Report
- Methodology Report

The reports are available on the Community Development Institute website at www.unbc.ca/community-development-institute and the City of Fort St. John website at <http://www.fortstjohn.ca/>.

About the Community Development Institute

The Community Development Institute (CDI) at the University of Northern British Columbia (UNBC) was established in 2004 with a broad mandate in community, economic, and regional development. Since then, it has worked in partnership with communities across north and central BC to identify and then adapt to changes, opportunities, and challenges emerging in the new global / rural economy.

The CDI Office and Research Program in Fort St. John, located at The Forge, was established to work with the community to identify and take action on strategies for economic diversification and community resiliency. The CDI works in partnership with the City of Fort St. John and in collaboration with the community, industry, local business, community organizations, First Nations, and all levels of government with the objective of achieving greater impact of research, planning, and innovating at the community, regional, and program level. This community-based work will focus on enhancing the quality of life and growing a sustainable economy in Fort St. John.

For further information about this program, feel free to contact Greg Halseth or Marleen Morris, Co-Directors of UNBC's Community Development Institute.

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Executive Summary

This Summary Report is based on information collected through a community survey managed by the University of Northern British Columbia's Community Development Institute located at The Forge. The survey, entitled "Your Voice: Fort St. John", was administered between August and October 2018. The purpose of the survey was to support decision-making on community investments aimed at improving the quality of life in the city. The findings will also help guide the development of a social framework and economic framework for the City. A total of 1,020 surveys were completed, and the survey respondents provided information under the following topics: economy, education, services, community engagement, environment, facilities and services, and community change.

Economy:

- While the majority of respondents felt that the local economy was strong, opinions were more divided on whether it was diverse. The diversity of the local economy and services is especially important for attracting new households and creating a more sustainable community.
- Respondents were also split on whether local wages were sufficient to cover cost of living, with long time residents and low-income households especially noting challenges with cost-of-living. Challenges of housing affordability were noted by many respondents.
- To support development of the workforce, most respondents agreed to employers were very supportive when it came to career development and job training. However, respondents noted a need to improve awareness of supports for those who were unemployed or in employment transition.
- Almost two-thirds of respondents reported that a vibrant downtown core was lacking in Fort St. John, with homeowners and long time residents even more likely to report needing to enhance the vibrancy of the downtown.
- When it came to purchasing, the ability to access locally produced food was strongly supported, while respondents were split on their ability to buy all of their daily needs, or their major purchases, locally. Respondents also suggested that more investments could be made in strengthening customer service amongst local businesses.

Education:

- With about 43% of respondents assessing that their access to a quality K-12 school system was generally ‘acceptable’, and about the same percentage assessing their access to lifelong learning opportunities was also ‘acceptable’, suggests opportunities for improvement building upon a solid base.
- The same suggestions of an ‘acceptable’ base of employment and career training, and post-secondary education, suggests opportunities for improvement across educational services.
- Foreshadowing results under the availability of local services, the large number of respondents who reported that they were not familiar with literacy programming for children, adults, or new Canadians suggests a need for more and ongoing communication about locally available services.

Community and Social Services:

- Supports for seniors are becoming increasingly important in Fort St. John. Those most familiar with seniors housing felt that availability was not very good or poor. A similar pattern of responses was seen in responses to satisfaction with general supports for older residents, including home support and transportation. This is an area for further attention and investment.
- When asked about satisfaction with supports to vulnerable residents fleeing violence, and those who are homeless, respondents were generally split between those who felt they were acceptable and those who felt they needed improvement.
- When asked about satisfaction with supports for the LGBTQ2 community, people living with low incomes, or people with disabilities, the largest share of respondents stated that they did not know. The same was true when people were asked about the availability of programs and services for immigrants, youth, and the Indigenous population. For those who knew about the programming, satisfaction levels were generally solid, suggesting a strong base and the need for further attention. Most critically, however, is the need for more and ongoing communication as broadening awareness of such programs is an important first step to helping connect people with these supports.

Health Services:

- The general survey finding was that more than 60% of respondents expressed concerns about the quality of health care services in Fort St. John.
- Concerns were especially high when it came to questions regarding overall accessibility of health care services, access to medical specialists, referrals and access to health services not available in the community, and supports for those who had to travel outside of the community for care, and preventative health services.
- Across all of these health questions, respondents who had lived in the community for a long time were more likely to be less satisfied with available services.
- The availability of dental services in Fort St. John, in contrast, received very favourable reviews.
- Services in support of mental health, addictions issues, and the provision of culturally sensitive health services, all were reported as needing attention.
- As with community and social services, the most important finding is that a large share of respondents to many of the questions reported simply that they 'did not know' about the health service in question. This highlights the need for ongoing communication and awareness building about the range of health services and service processes available in the community.

Community Engagement:

- When it comes to opportunities to participate in community organizations or through volunteering, respondents described a generally positive participatory environment that is conducive to building a strong sense of community.
- However, when the questions got more specific, such as opportunities for involvement for youth, seniors, and people who are new to Fort St. John many of the respondents answered that they did not know about these programs. The same was true of programs that promoted connections at the neighbourhood level and interactions between different generations. The opinions of those who did comment were often that improvement in these areas is needed.
- Supports for multiculturalism, and connecting between groups with different cultural backgrounds, were seen positively.

- While support for the arts and culture scene in the city was generally high, respondents suggested that more attention is needed to supporting affordable or low-cost participation in arts and cultural events in the city, and that attention to facilities and venues is warranted.
- There was strong recognition of the opportunities for residents to get involved in local decision-making, including with local organizations and with the City of Fort St. John. In these questions, close to half of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that these opportunities were available to residents.

Environment:

- In terms of the natural environment, there was generally strong support for current accessibility to natural areas and green spaces in the city. Some additional work may be needed with respect to weed control and enhancing community gardens.
- In terms of air and water quality, just over half of respondents agreed that the city had good air quality compared to 70% indicating that it had good water quality.
- In terms of neighbourhood environments, while respondents generally felt them to be safe, many did not feel they were designed to support access to services and amenities.
- In terms of non-vehicle routes and pathways throughout the city, respondents were generally positive with pedestrian pathways, but more mixed with respect to having safe bicycle routes. Seniors were more likely to report that pedestrian routes are not safe.
- In terms of vehicle routes, only about half of respondents felt that the road system is efficient and safe. However, when it came to public transportation, the largest share of respondents indicated that they were simply not familiar with the topic. This warrants examination not only in terms of reviewing bus route deficiency, but also to communication and awareness building about the availability of different public transportation options.

Community Facilities and Services:

- When asked about satisfaction with community activities and services, the results suggest that many were highly rated. For example, there were high levels of satisfaction with arts and culture opportunities, special events, recreation opportunities and

facilities, as well as parks and trails. That said, each of these subjects had groups of respondents who cited the need for improvements.

- There were numbers of the suggestions made about improvements to sidewalks and trails as ways to increase recreational opportunities. Suggestions also focused on diversifying the range of indoor facilities to keep people active during the winter months, increasing indoor play areas for children, and creating more spaces for teens.
- When asked specifically about community facilities, the public library, visitor information center, and the museum all received relatively high ratings. However, there were also about 20% to 25% of respondents who did not appear to be familiar with these important local facilities.
- Perhaps not surprisingly, opinions on snow clearing were split. While 41% indicated that they felt these services were inadequate, more than one-third rated them very good or excellent.
- For protection and emergency services, most were generally rated favourably.

Community Change:

- Looking at a range of community issues over time, more than half of respondents felt that the overall quality of life in Fort St. John had improved over the last five years. While not quite so high, a still positive share of respondents found that the friendliness of city residents had been maintained or improved over the past five years.

In terms of physical attractiveness, while nearly half of respondents felt improvements have been made over the past five years, about one half still found that investments were needed to enhance city attractiveness.

- While the city also received strong marks in terms of being a good place to live, and a good place to raise a family, there remain numbers of respondents who identify the need for improvements in order to improve local quality-of-life. Of note, just under two-thirds of respondents felt the community was either not very good, or a poor, place to retire. This it would seem to identify a specific and focused area for needed investments.

Building a Stronger Community:

- When asked about activities they might undertake in the next year to help make Fort St. John a better place to live, many people responded by suggesting they will become more engaged with the voluntary sector, and with participating in community groups.
- Also important were suggestions about participating more in civic activities and community events. This included taking more advantage of local recreation opportunities and facilities.
- As part of the beautification theme for the downtown core, and enhancement of community parks, many called for more sidewalks and trails to help encourage them to get out walking and bicycling with family and friends.
- Environment focused activities included more attention to recycling, reducing waste, and planting more trees in the community
- On the social side, people also talked about becoming more involved in connecting with their neighbours and community groups, as well as to get involved in activities that would help foster relationships across generations.
- On the economic development front, respondents look forward to participating in the growth of the local business and retail community; and with supporting that community with their shopping and purchasing.

Research Process

The data and information for this project was collected through the community survey “Your Voice Fort St. John” in the form of an online survey. There were also paper copies made available for those who wished, at City Hall, the Fort St. John Public Library, North Peace Senior’s Housing, and at the Farmer’s Market. The survey was administered to residents of Fort St. John between August 15 and October 25, 2018.

In addition to the website, our team also attended many community events and public facilities to set up tables where respondents could use the tablets provided to complete the survey. Community locations included the North Peace Leisure Pool, the North Peace Arena, the Pomeroy Sports Center, City Parks, the Fort St. John Hospital, and Northern Lights College.

Detailed information about research ethics, socio-economic data sources, and survey methodology can be found in the separate Methodology Report.

Introduction

The online community survey “Your Voice Fort St. John” was a part of the work being undertaken in Fort St. John by the University of Northern British Columbia’s (UNBC) Community Development Institute (CDI) via The Forge. In the initial research phase of the project, the CDI has completed the following projects:

- Fort St. John Community Profile
- Fort St. John Program and Service Inventory
- Fort St. John Community Indicators Program
- Your Voice Fort St. John Community Survey
- Fort St. John Age-Friendly Assessment and Action Plan

In consecutive phases, The Forge aims to gather, process, and present data and information about the community of Fort St. John as a way of meaningfully informing local and regional decision-making.

“Your Voice Fort St. John” was designed to explore community areas that affect quality of life and provide input into the community indicators that will be tracked over time.

The survey was open to all residents of Fort St. John and asked for their perspectives on a variety of topics, including the economy, local education, availability and satisfaction with a variety of services, community engagement, the environment, and changes in the community over time. This Summary Report describes the overall findings from the survey. A detailed reporting of survey responses is provided in the Survey Report, while the Methodology Report explains the way the survey was created and delivered.

Profile of Survey Respondents

The survey asked several questions in order to provide a better sense of the backgrounds of the survey respondents. Information about the entire population of Fort St. John has been taken from the 2016 Census by Statistics Canada.

Almost 68% of our survey respondents were female, while the 2016 Census reports that 51.6% of the total population of Fort St. John is male.

Around 65% were in the family formation ages of between 25 to 49 years. Another 18% reported being in the age groups of 50 to 64 years of age, the pre-retirement group. Only 5% of respondents were seniors aged 65 and older, and 10% represented youth aged 16 to 24 years.

Ninety-two percent of survey respondents were Canadian citizens. This is comparable to 91% of the total population of the city as recorded in the Census.

Over one-half of all respondents were legally married and another 15% were living with a common-law partner. This total of 67.7% living in a partnership was higher than Fort St. John's Census population, where 57% reported being married or living common-law.

Over one-third of respondents reported some university education, and another close to 30% had a college or other non-university certificate or diploma. Trades certificates were reported by almost 10% of survey respondents. With a total of 74% of survey respondents with some post-secondary education, the survey sample had a higher educational attainment than 2016 Census reported for Fort St. John (where 48% listed some post-secondary education).

Over 55% of survey respondents were employed full-time. Another close to 24% were in part-time employment or self-employed. At 6.5% of all respondents, those not in the labour force were less represented among the survey respondents than in the Census population of Fort St. John (21%). The same was true for the unemployed.

All income categories were represented among the survey respondents in terms of annual income. Around one-quarter of respondents reported an annual household income between \$80,000 and \$120,000 annually. Over 15% were in the highest income bracket of \$160,000 or more, while there were fewer respondents in the lowest income categories. It should be noted that 17% chose not to answer the question.

In regards to tenancy, 66% of survey respondents reported owning their own home. This was close to 60% for the total population of the city as reported in the 2016 Census.

Just over 10% of survey respondents reported living in one-person households, while over one-quarter of the total population consists of one-person households. On the other hand, households of four or more persons featured higher representation than in the Census population. A little less than half of all respondent households had members under 18 years of age. In almost 70% of all cases, household members were related.

Most survey respondents were long-time residents of Fort St. John. In fact, almost 80% have lived in Fort St. John for more than five years to all of their lives. Fewer than 5% were newcomers to Fort St. John, and fewer than 2% represented the part-time population of the city.

1. Economy

1.1 Introduction

The state of the economy in the community plays a central role in the quality of life of its residents. Long-term, stable employment is an important factor in the economic considerations of most households. Ideally, a local economy offers the security of stable long-term employment; the satisfaction of job opportunities for a variety of interests, skills, and qualifications; and the variety to provide opportunities for meaningful employment and financial stability throughout the different stages of life. These factors have an impact on a community's ability to attract and retain not only a strong workforce but also a diverse population that becomes and stays connected to the community.

Like many resource-based communities, Fort St. John's economy has experienced upswings and downturns. In these communities, support for people to enter, stay, or advance in the workforce is important. With adequate supports in place, a community can ensure maximum benefits from upswings by ensuring a diverse and qualified workforce is present and committed to the community. In times of downturns, supports for skills development and diversification, business supports, and social supports, to name but a few, can help a community carry its population and the local economy through periods of high unemployment and industry changes.

Another important consideration in the economy and quality of life in the community is the presence of a vibrant retail and service sector. When residents have the opportunity to buy what they need in the community, the money they spend stays in the community and boosts the local retail sector. At the same time, the convenience of not having to travel far for basic necessities and other purchases adds to quality of life, especially for those who lack the financial means to travel.

1.2 Your Voice Fort St. John Survey Results: Overall perspective on the economy

The survey began by exploring respondents' perspective on the local economy. The state of the economy and presence of strong employment opportunities has long been considered central to the recruitment and retention of residents and business development. The majority of survey participants viewed the local economy as strong and roughly one-half considered local employment diverse in the sense that it provided opportunities to all genders and people in various life situations.

Overall, roughly 70% of participants felt that Fort St. John had a strong local economy. When asked to reflect on whether or not Fort St. John had a diverse local economy, however, opinions

among survey respondents were divided. Roughly half agreed or strongly agreed that the local economy in Fort St. John was diverse, but more than one-quarter disagreed with that view. Those respondents with higher levels of education were more likely to report that Fort St. John did not have a diverse economy. This was also the response pattern of those with higher levels of income. Strengthening the diversity of the local economy is important to reinforce the resiliency of households, small businesses, industry, services, and local government operations. It can also play a role in the recruitment and retention of families, as a family might consider moving for employment for the main bread winner, but availability of employment opportunities for other family members might influence a decision to stay in the community long-term. Furthermore, the relocation of professionals can also be made more attractive by diverse business services, shopping, and amenities.

More specifically, employment opportunities for women can be a determining factor in keeping families in the community. We asked if there were rewarding careers for women in Fort St. John. In this case, 57% said 'yes', with a smaller group of respondents feeling more neutral about the issue (20%), and an even smaller group who disagreed or strongly disagreed (just under 17%). In addition, the survey also asked if flexible work arrangements were available in Fort St. John. Examples included access to part-time work, working sharing, and the ability to work from home. The greatest proportion of respondents agreed or strongly agreed (48%), followed by a group of respondents that felt more neutral about the issue.

When we asked people if the jobs available in Fort St. John offered wages sufficient to cover the costs of living, responses varied from roughly 48% who agreed or strongly agreed versus the remaining group of participants who expressed concerns. Those with lower levels of income were more likely to report that wages were not sufficient to cover local costs of living. This likely reflects the income discrepancies between households that earn high industry wages and households that rely upon lower wages earned in the service industry. Those who had lived in the community for a long time were also more likely to indicate that wages were not sufficient to cover local costs of living.

In this context, a question about the availability of housing options that are appropriate for household incomes in the community is of interest. Roughly 49% of the respondents felt that housing affordability was not very good or poor. This was followed by roughly 30% who felt housing costs were acceptable.

1.3 Your Voice Fort St. John Survey Results: Workforce supports

The readiness and renewal of the workforce can position the community to maximize economic benefits during economic upswings, for example from construction and resource-based industry developments in the region. When we asked if employers in the community support

training and career development, including apprenticeships, approximately two-thirds said 'yes'.

Resource-based economies attract people who are looking for work; but the volatile and fluctuating nature of resource-based industries can mean cycles of change for many households going from financial stability and high incomes to times of financial insecurity during downturns in the resource sector. The survey assessed if respondents felt there was support for those who are unemployed or in transition in Fort St. John. Over 20% of participants were unfamiliar with such supports; however, around 37% felt good supports were in place. This was followed by roughly 23% who were more neutral about the issue. Those respondents with a higher level of education were more likely to report not knowing about supports.

In many resource towns the role of business goes beyond providing employment and includes community support. Examples may include event sponsorship, donations, and engaging as volunteers or board members of community groups. When exploring public opinion about business support for the community in Fort St. John, the survey revealed that just over three-quarters of respondents felt that there has been support.

1.4 Your Voice Fort St. John Survey Results: Retail and service sector

The vibrancy of the downtown core influences a variety of community aspects. It can enhance the quality of life that is so critical to recruit and retain residents. It is indicative of a diverse and active local retail sector. Finally, having a central location with an active service and retail sector also provides a setting for community interaction and events, fostering a sense of community.

The survey explored perceptions about the downtown core, specifically focusing on the vibrancy of retail, services, and restaurants near 100th Street and 100th Avenue. In response, almost two-thirds of participants contended that a vibrant downtown core was missing in Fort St. John. Homeowners, and long-time residents, were more likely to report the need to increase the vibrancy in the downtown core. Given the significance attached to vibrancy of the downtown core, this feedback provides a critical focal point to inform ongoing strategic economic development strategies in the community.

Building upon questions about the cost of living and further exploring the retail sector, respondents were asked if there were opportunities to buy all of their daily needs locally. Roughly 55% agreed or strongly agreed, while about 35% expressed concerns about their ability to complete their daily shopping in Fort St. John. The survey then asked about major purchases. Roughly 55% of survey respondents found that they can buy major purchases locally. Interestingly, across the evaluative variables, those who were retired were more likely to agree that they can make major purchases locally, while respondents aged 20-44 were more likely to disagree.

Another aspect of the local retail sector that was explored was access to locally grown or prepared foods. Fort St. John has benefitted from a strong agriculture sector. As such, when people were asked if there are opportunities to purchase locally produced food, roughly 63% said 'yes'.

The final question exploring the retail and service sector was concerned with customer service. Only around one-third of respondents reported being satisfied with customer service while around two-thirds reported a neutral attitude or dissatisfaction. Interestingly, higher levels of dissatisfaction were found among long-time residents of Fort St. John. These results suggest that more investments could be made to strengthen good customer service amongst local businesses.

2. Education

2.1 Introduction

Research suggests that level of education impacts many areas of life. Employment is one of the most directly linked areas, since education generally enhances career and job opportunities in today's economy. Through meaningful employment, and the financial stability that comes with employment, a person or family have the ability to pursue areas of interest and enhance their quality of life. On the other hand, low levels of educational attainment are often linked to poor living conditions and less favourable health outcomes.¹

One basic building block for educational attainment, employability, and active community participation is literacy. While literacy is generally associated with children, it can be an issue for adults, as well. Furthermore, the impacts of literacy are generational as adult or parental literacy has been found to be very important in fostering literacy and a love of learning in children.

2.2 Your Voice Fort St. John Survey Results: Overall perception of education

The first questions regarding education in Fort St. John focused on various aspects of the educational continuum. This included the K-12 school system, lifelong learning, career training and professional development, and post-secondary education. Recognizing the role of education and training in the development and renewal of the workforce as well as the overall long-term quality of life, the survey first assessed satisfaction levels with education programs in Fort St. John. Roughly 43% of respondents felt that their access to a quality school system was acceptable. Just over one-quarter felt that their household had very good or excellent access to a quality school system. Interestingly, respondents between the ages of 20 and 54 were more likely to report that the school system was 'acceptable', while those who were over age 60 were more likely to report that the school system was 'very good' or 'excellent'.

Examples of lifelong learning include personal interest courses and programs such as photography, gardening, or woodworking. These add quality of life through the pursuit of interests. They can also provide avenues for active participation in the community and may indirectly influence employability. Given the role of lifelong learning in strengthening connections to the community and overall quality of life, people were asked to evaluate their access to opportunities for lifelong learning. In response, about 42% felt that the availability of

¹ Statistics Canada. 2013. What Makes Canadians Healthy or Unhealthy? Available at <https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/health-promotion/population-health/what-determines-health/what-makes-canadians-healthy-unhealthy.html>. Accessed on December 13, 2018.

lifelong learning programs was acceptable. This was followed by roughly 34% of respondents who felt that existing opportunities were not very good or poor.

Opportunities for career or professional development can directly influence job satisfaction and retention of workers. They are furthermore relevant supports for families and individuals in transition during downturns, industry changes, or for personal development. The opportunity to build on one's education and work experience to add skills and qualifications is one determining factor in available career paths. When people were asked if they felt there were opportunities for career training and professional development, roughly 46% felt existing programs were acceptable. This was followed by just over 30% of respondents who indicated improvements were needed.

Post-secondary education in small communities can be a challenge. In some cases, it can be pursued through long-distance education; sometimes travel or a temporary move may be required; and in places such as Fort St. John there are college campuses that host both college and university programs in the community. The survey assessed perceptions about locally delivered post-secondary education. Again, just over 45% felt that existing programs delivered locally were acceptable, followed by 32% of respondents that locally delivered post-secondary education needed improvements.

2.3 Your Voice Fort St. John Survey Results: Literacy

Literacy is a foundational building block for all forms and levels of education. It determines employability directly, since literacy is required in the workplace, and indirectly, since it lays the foundation for education and qualifications. Moreover, basic reading and writing capabilities, and the access to information they provide, are used in most social settings and community activity contexts. Therefore, illiteracy can impede community participation and engagement. The importance of adult literacy, furthermore, lies in the fact that parental literacy is directly linked to children's literacy and, therefore, education and future prospects.

The survey asked a series of questions that focused on literacy programs. When people were asked to reflect on their satisfaction with literacy programs for children, most (58%) found the programs to be acceptable to excellent. However, the finding that the idea of literacy programs is most commonly associated with children rather than adults was reflected in the responses concerning adult literacy programs in Fort St. John; there was a greater proportion of people (42%) who were not familiar with such programs. Most who were able to offer their opinion felt that the programs were acceptable (29%); but overall opinions about adult programs were less enthusiastic than those about children's literacy. Lastly, survey respondents were asked about literacy programs for new Canadians. In this case, most of the respondents who were familiar with such programs felt that they were acceptable (24%). However, a very large share of respondents (49%) was not familiar enough to offer an opinion.

3. Community and Social Services

3.1 Introduction

Community and social services provide support for vulnerable groups, such as seniors; people, especially women and children, fleeing violence; people who are homeless; people with disabilities; and those living on low incomes. These groups of people might have to rely on support to ensure that their daily needs are met and personal safety and well-being are guaranteed. These supports can, for example, be financial help, advice, or the provision of infrastructure, such as shelters and housing.

Beyond meeting basic needs for survival and a reasonable level of well-being, community and social services also help people build the skills and knowledge that will enable them to succeed and prosper in the community and the economy. Service locations themselves can provide safe spaces to build community and become engaged. In addition, by offering, or referring clients to, anything from life skills advice and classes to career-related education, support services lay the foundation for vulnerable people and those in personal or economic transition to find and build their confidence and independence.

3.2 Your Voice Fort St. John Survey Results: Vulnerable population groups

Community and social services provide critical supports to address the immediate and long-term needs of residents, and help strengthen advocacy and quality of life within the community. The survey explored perceptions about community and social services tailored to specified vulnerable population groups.

Seniors can be in vulnerable positions due to, for example, health and mobility issues, or financial constraints. For older residents in Fort St. John, the quality of housing will shape how they age and maintain their independence in the community. When respondents were asked to reflect on the availability of housing for seniors, those most familiar with such assets felt that their availability was not very good or poor. Not surprisingly, respondents 45 years of age and older, and long-time residents, were more likely to report that housing availability for seniors was poor.

The survey followed up by asking people about their satisfaction levels with the availability of supports for seniors. Examples included the availability of home support and transportation. Again, most respondents (43%) expressed concerns about the availability of supports for older residents, indicating that this is an area for further attention and investments to be made moving forward. Less than 10% rated supports for seniors as very good or excellent.

When we asked people to comment on the availability of programs and services for the LGBTQ2 (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, and Questioning) community, about 60% indicated they did not know. Broadening awareness of such programs will be an important first step to connect people with these supports.

As the survey continued to explore supports for vulnerable residents in the community, it asked people about the availability of shelters, housing, and services for those fleeing violence. For those who were able to comment, most felt that the available services were acceptable (32%). This was followed by 20% of respondents who felt improvements were needed to address the needs of residents fleeing violence. Thirty-six percent of respondents indicated that they did not know. Interestingly, respondents aged 60 years and older were increasingly likely to report that supports for those fleeing violence were not very good.

Furthermore, when we asked survey respondents to indicate their satisfaction with the availability of programs, supports, and services for those who are homeless, around one-quarter of participants felt that their availability was acceptable. This was, however, equaled by a group (26%) that felt the availability of such supports was not very good and needed more strategic investments to address the needs in the community.

When asked about supports for people with disabilities, the largest share of respondents reported that they did not know. Of those who responded, a greater proportion felt that access to programs and services was not very good or poor (24%). This was followed by a group who felt the services were acceptable (23%).

Building upon these questions about supports for a variety of vulnerable groups, we wanted to explore how people felt about access to programs and services to support low-income households. These low-income households may include the under employed, low-income seniors on fixed incomes, people with a disability, students, and others. The largest share of respondents (37%) reported that they did not know about these programs and services. Of those who responded, while there were some respondents who considered low-income supports acceptable (21%), most (36%) suggested that access to supports for these vulnerable residents was not very good or poor. Interestingly, respondents between the ages of 55 and 75 years were more likely to report that supports for vulnerable residents were not very good.

3.3 Your Voice Fort St. John Survey Results: Building skills and knowledge

Some services focus on supporting population groups who are facing barriers to accessing education and the job market for a variety of reasons. These services, with a focus on building skills and knowledge, included for example child care, early childhood education, immigrant services, and programs targeting Indigenous people.

Affordable childcare is a necessity for many families to enable parents to seek employment or pursue their education. The survey invited participants to reflect on the availability of affordable childcare options. Most respondents (55%) felt that the availability of affordable childcare was not very good or poor in the community. Less than 5% felt that availability was very good or excellent. Perhaps not surprisingly, respondents between the ages of 25 and 39 were more likely to report that childcare supports in the community were not very good or poor. In addition, long-time residents also were more likely to report that childcare services were not very good or poor.

Building upon this interest in community services for youth, the survey also asked about satisfaction levels with the availability of early childhood education (ECE). ECE is important for early child development and can set the stage for successful K-12 education and further qualifications. Examples of ECE may include programs such as Strong Start or Success by Six. In this case, roughly 34% of respondents felt that the programs were acceptable, followed by about 22% who felt the availability of ECE in Fort St. John was very good or excellent. These findings mirrored the perspectives on education in Fort St. John in general as well as childhood literacy programs. One interesting outcome of cross-tabulating the survey responses with the length of time the respondent had been in the community was that the data suggest that many of those who move to Fort St. John do so without children and, as a result, had very limited awareness of the services and supports available for children.

The survey also asked about the availability of programs and services for immigrants. Cultural differences and language barriers, for example, can mean that new immigrants are in a position of needing extra support with integration into the community, pursuing education and job qualifications, and accessing the job market to seek meaningful employment and support themselves and their families. While many respondents (57%) were not familiar with such programs, most of those who were familiar with immigrant services found them to be acceptable (21%) or very good (13%).

When the survey asked participants about their perceptions concerning the availability of programs and services for Indigenous people, over 40% were not familiar with those services. Given the growing Indigenous population in Fort St. John, communicating program options might be an area for added attention in the future. Most respondents who were familiar with such programs had positive opinions. Over 23% felt that the availability of programs delivering supports for Indigenous people were very good to excellent, and around 21% felt that they were acceptable.

4. Health Services

4.1 Introduction

The availability of health services in northern communities can be problematic. Attraction and retention of doctors and specialists, and the coordination of access to specialized services, are challenges for some health authorities. Long wait times for appointments or treatment, and long-distance traveling for health services, are an inconvenience at best. These issues can put financial strains on patients, and can make it impossible to remain in the community for people with serious health conditions. Having a variety of health services available locally is important in supporting a good quality of life for residents and is vitally important for those who regularly have to rely on health services due to health conditions. The availability of health services can also be a determining factor in attracting new residents, as well as business investment, to the community.

4.2 Your Voice Fort St. John Survey Results: Overall ratings

Given the role health services and programs play in shaping the overall quality of life for residents and in attracting small businesses and larger economic development investments, the survey inquired about respondents' views on health services in general and a number of specific services and programs. Overall, more than 60% survey respondents expressed concerns about the quality of health care services in Fort St. John. This was higher for respondents who had lived in the community for a long time. This was followed by roughly 27% who found the quality of health care services to be acceptable.

One aspect of the quality of health services was the overall accessibility of health care services in the community. Just under three-quarters of the respondents felt that the accessibility of health services was not very good or poor. This was even higher among those respondents between age 25 and 49 years, and those who had lived in the community for a long time. These issues of accessibility continued to resonate as we probed further to explore local perceptions about medical specialists in Fort St. John. Collectively, roughly 84% of the survey participants felt that the availability of medical specialists in the community was not very good or poor.

Another area of health services explored in the survey were services to support childbirth. Such services are related to the supports provided by obstetricians, midwives, and birthing doulas. For those who were able to comment, a substantial proportion of respondents (31%) expressed concerns by rating the availability of such supports as not very good or poor. This again was followed by a group (23%) who felt that the availability of childbirth services was acceptable. As with some other services, a large share of respondents (33%) reported that they did not know.

As expected, the share of respondents who reported that they did not know increased after about age 45 years.

Overall, concerns were expressed about referrals and access to health services that are not available in Fort St. John. For example, just under 50% of respondents described referrals and access to distant health services as not very good or poor. This compared to an additional 28% who felt that such referrals and access to non-local health services were acceptable. Interestingly, those respondents age 55 years and older found referrals acceptable.

Building on the challenges that residents encounter to access health care in other regional centres, the survey asked people to reflect on supports for people who must travel outside of the community. Such supports may include financial, emotional, or family sources of support. In this case, just under 50% of survey participants expressed that access to such supports was not very good or poor. Again, a smaller group of just over 15% of respondents felt that the availability of these types of supports were acceptable for local residents. As with some other services, a large share of respondents (28%) reported that they did not know.

Across all “health” questions, those respondents who had lived in the community for a long time were more likely to be less satisfied with the available health services.

4.3 Your Voice Fort St. John Survey Results: Prevention and rehabilitation

Survey questions also included inquiries about respondents’ assessments of preventative health services. Almost 45% of respondents felt that the availability of preventative health services in Fort St. John were not very good or poor. This was followed by just over 18% of survey participants who indicated that the level of availability for these services in the community was acceptable. As with some other services, a large share of respondents (33%) reported that they did not know.

The availability of rehabilitative health services in the community was generally deemed to be available at an acceptable level or better (54%). Such supports included services such as physiotherapists and occupational therapists.

In reflecting upon the availability of dental services in Fort St. John, overall, respondents had a more favourable view about the availability of dental supports compared to other types of health care services in the community. Most notably, while just under 45% felt that the availability of these services was acceptable, just over 41% of respondents collectively felt that the availability of dental care was very good or excellent.

4.4 Your Voice Fort St. John Survey Results: Mental health and addictions

As we continued asking about the accessibility of medical services, we asked people to reflect on the availability of mental health programs and services in the community. According to a 2013 Health Profile by Statistics Canada, Fort St. John has a perceived mental health similar to, or better, than the provincial average. However, resource towns can face a very specific set of mental health challenges based on their social fabric and economic ups and downs, for example. The availability, de-stigmatization, and awareness of mental health and addictions services for a large population of industry workers and their families are an important aspect of the quality of health services overall.

Since there is often a stigma attached to mental health and addictions issues, awareness of those services can be lower than for other services. In this case, nearly one-quarter of respondents felt unable to comment on the availability of mental health supports. However, 55% of respondents expressed concerns by indicating the availability of these supports was not very good or poor.

In the context of addictions and substance abuse programs, the largest share of respondents (44%) reported that they did not know. For those who responded, most generally felt that the availability was not very good or poor. This was followed by a small group (20%) who felt their availability was acceptable.

The survey followed this with an assessment of counselling services in Fort St. John. Such supports can be instrumental to guide and support individuals and households through volatile economic and social conditions. In this circumstance, just over 43% felt that the availability of these supports was not very good or poor. By comparison, just over 25% noted that they felt the availability of counselling services was acceptable. As with many other health service categories, nearly one-quarter of respondents reported that they did not know.

4.5 Your Voice Fort St. John Survey Results: Culturally sensitive health services

Cultural differences and prejudices can be a considerable barrier for Indigenous people and people from other cultures accessing health services. They may not seek treatment, for example, out of fear and discomfort in a medical environment that does not reflect their identity or incorporate their cultural principles. In other cases, cultural bias within a medical environment may lead to traumatic experiences or misunderstandings in the course of treatment. It is, therefore, important to assess satisfaction levels with culturally sensitive health care services.

When asked about culturally sensitive health services for Indigenous people, most respondents (68%) reported that they did not know. While the greatest proportion of those who were able

to comment (20%) felt that the availability of such supports was good or acceptable, around 12% expressed concerns about these services, indicating that this is an area in need of attention.

These perceptions similarly resonated for culturally sensitive health care services for people from other cultures. Again, most respondents (68%) reported that they did not know. The most predominant group (13%) felt these services were acceptable, but there was a group of respondents (12%) who collectively rated the availability of such supports for people from other cultures as not very good or poor.

5. Community Engagement

5.1 Introduction

Community engagement in activities and organizations plays a critical role in strengthening connections and fostering a sense of community. It can improve many quality of life aspects for residents. As these social bonds become stronger from routine interaction, residents develop well-worn pathways of participation to address many community needs.

Engaged citizens are more likely take ownership of their community and initiatives they are involved in. Furthermore, many programs, including for example recreation as well as support services, depend on volunteers. Therefore, opportunities for volunteering and residents' willingness to get involved can contribute significantly to the quality of life in a community.

5.2 Your Voice Fort St. John Survey Results: Involvement

Involvement in the community can take on many forms. Opportunities for involvement include memberships in organizations and institutions, volunteering, local organizations taking action on local issues, and demonstrating support for non-profit organizations who are active in the community.

The survey asked participants to reflect on opportunities to join community organizations and institutions. The responses portray a positive social environment in Fort St. John. For roughly 42% of respondents, the opportunities to belong to community organizations are adequate, while an additional one-third felt that such opportunities were very good or excellent.

The survey also asked about satisfaction levels with opportunities for volunteering. The responses again paint a very positive picture of a community environment conducive to building a strong sense of community. Just under half of the respondents collectively found that opportunities for volunteering in Fort St. John were very good or excellent.

5.3 Your Voice Fort St. John Survey Results: Connections

Opportunities for connecting refer to connections on an interpersonal level. This can mean youth or senior engagement, establishing connections with newcomers and people of other cultures, getting to know neighbours, and intergenerational connections. As part of these connections, the survey also explored some of the venues that can facilitate connections through events or gatherings.

Addressing connections among population groups and individuals, the survey brought up the engagement of a diversity of groups within the community. For example, people were asked if they felt there were adequate opportunities for youth engagement in Fort St. John. In this case, roughly 29% said such opportunities were acceptable, with remaining respondents being split on the quality of opportunities that are provided. As with some opportunities described in this section, a large share of respondents (25%) reported that they did not know.

In terms of seniors, survey responses suggest that a number of residents may be concerned about the opportunities that older residents have to be engaged in Fort St. John. Despite a sizeable group of survey participants (23%) who felt that such opportunities were acceptable, a greater proportion of respondents (26%) felt that such opportunities were either not very good or poor. Again, a large share of respondents (38%) reported that they did not know.

After inquiring about different age groups, respondents were asked about opportunities to connect with people from different generations. Findings suggest that such opportunities in their current form are not very good or poor (44%); and therefore, require more strategic investment of resources in programs and activities. There was a smaller group of respondents (26%) who felt that such opportunities were acceptable.

Another common approach to supporting community engagement is to focus on connections at the neighbourhood level. A strong sense of community can be fostered through the relationships that neighbours have with each other. However, when we asked about support for opportunities to get to know neighbours, just under half of the respondents suggested that such support was not very good or poor. This suggests that there are opportunities to explore the potential of neighbourhood associations and events.

Diversity, in the context of engagement, is not limited to different generations; it can also be found in engagement with people of other cultural backgrounds. Given the diversity of residents in the community, the survey asked if there were adequate opportunities to celebrate multiculturalism. Overall, responses deem such opportunities to be acceptable or better (58%).

Survey participants were also asked how they felt about support for people who are new to Fort St. John. Individuals or families new to a community may rely on organized or semi-organized events and venues as a starting point to connecting with other residents. Other supports could include welcome information packages. A large share of respondents (39%) reported that they did not know about these supports. For those familiar with such supports, there was a general sense that such supports were acceptable (24%); although, there was a substantial group (26%) that was looking for improvements to support community engagement for new residents. Not surprisingly, respondents who had lived in the community for a long time were more likely to report 'do not know' when it came to questions about supports for people who were new to the community.

Throughout northern communities, seasonal changes and the harsh winter climate mean that gathering spaces that draw people in the summer may not be inviting in the winter months. It was, therefore, important to gauge community engagement opportunities throughout the year. When people were asked how they felt about spaces for community use and gathering in the summer, there was a general sense overall that such spaces were acceptable or better (70%). However, when it came to evaluating gathering spaces for the winter months, respondents were divided with just less than one-half reporting that available spaces were acceptable to excellent, versus almost half of the respondents indicating that more attention was needed to provide spaces for community engagement during the winter season.

5.4 Your Voice Fort St. John Survey Results: Participation

Active participation in the community, besides involvement through volunteering, often takes place in the arts and culture scene and in recreation. The survey inquired about the availability of such opportunities as well as low cost options, which increase accessibility to people of all income groups.

The survey explored opportunities for community engagement for people living on limited incomes. To start, the survey asked if there were adequate opportunities for free or low-cost recreation. In this case, respondents were divided between roughly half who felt such opportunities were acceptable to excellent, versus almost half of the respondents who indicated that more work needs to be done to ensure adequate opportunities are in place for low-income households. This was followed by a question about free or low-cost arts and culture. Here, roughly 40% of respondents rated these opportunities as not very good or poor, while about 28% indicated that they were acceptable.

When respondents were asked to reflect on the state of the arts and culture scene in general, just under 39% indicated that they found the arts and culture scene acceptable. There were also roughly one-quarter of respondents who felt the arts and culture scene was very good or excellent. About one-quarter of respondents suggested that further improvements were needed. For the arts and culture scene to flourish, venues are needed for creative expression. While just under 40% of survey respondents found these venues to be acceptable, less than 20% rated them very good to excellent. About 31% of respondents felt such venues were not very good or poor.

The survey also asked about opportunities for learning about, and appreciating, local history and culture. While this constitutes an opportunity for participation in the community, it can also be helpful in establishing a sense of identity for the community and connection of community members to the city. The most prominent group of respondents (39%) felt that such opportunities were acceptable, followed by a group of respondents (28%) who felt that more improvements were needed to strengthen such opportunities.

5.5 Your Voice Fort St. John Survey Results: Municipal decision-making

Opportunities to influence and take action on local planning and decision-making are another way of participating in the community and taking ownership and pride in the city. After reflecting on many aspects of community engagement in Fort St. John, survey participants were asked if they felt the community was a place where local organizations are encouraged to take action on issues and opportunities. Almost 37% of respondents either agreed or strongly agreed with this statement. This was followed by roughly one-third of respondents who felt more neutral about this issue.

This was followed with a question about whether Fort St. John is a community that demonstrates support for non-profit organizations. In response, just over 55% agreed or strongly agreed with this statement, followed by roughly 21% who felt more neutral about the statement. Collectively, these positive perceptions demonstrate that some critical community components are in place and are supported.

Furthermore, we explored perceptions about whether residents feel encouraged to get involved with municipal decision-making processes. Almost half of the survey respondents either agreed or strongly agreed, followed by roughly 23% who felt more neutral about the issue.

6. Environment

6.1 Introduction

Increasingly, communities are recognizing the ways in which the environment shapes the quality of life in their city. Environment refers to the built physical environment in the city, as well as green spaces and air and water quality. As a way of measuring how residents value and evaluate the environment of Fort St. John, we looked at opportunities to access nature, options for traditional and alternative transportation, and maintaining the quality of air and water as important elements to the community.

6.2 Your Voice Fort St. John Survey Results: Access to nature

For many people, the first thing that comes to mind when talking about the environment is the natural environment. Access to nature is an important part of quality of life in a community as it relates to physical activity and healthy habits, as well as esthetic appeal. Access to natural spaces can refer to the presence of green space within city limits, transportation to green spaces, or developed trails within or outside city limits that allow people to experience the natural environment.

Almost three-quarters of the survey respondents either agreed or strongly agreed that residents of Fort St. John have access to natural spaces. When asked more specifically about community gardens, just over half of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed that there is access, while a smaller group of just over 20% either disagreed or strongly disagreed.

Touching upon another aspect of quality green spaces within city limits, the survey also asked about public perceptions concerning the effectiveness of weed control. Opinions across respondents were much more varied compared to other issues. In this case, roughly 35% disagreed or strongly disagreed. By comparison, roughly 27% of respondents either agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, leaving 20% who felt more neutral. There was also a share of respondents (17%) who reported that they did not know.

6.3 Your Voice Fort St. John Survey Results: Transportation and mobility

Many communities are increasingly interested in how their environment affects residents' mobility and access to all parts of the community. In this section, a series of questions were presented to explore issues related to the built physical environment in the city. Various aspects of transportation play a role in giving residents the best possible ability to move around the community. These include the presence, design, and condition of pedestrian routes, roads, and public transportation which connect residential areas and amenities.

Neighbourhoods are the environment in which we live and spend a lot of time. Accessible amenities and safety determine, to a large part, the quality of life and appeal of a neighbourhood. Roughly 47% of survey respondents felt that neighbourhoods in Fort St. John were not designed with amenities within walking distance. An additional 20% felt more neutral. In another question, just under 50% of respondents felt their neighbourhoods were safe, and 28% felt neutral about neighbourhood safety. Older respondents were more likely to report being neutral on this question. Planning for safety and access to amenities may be areas for future consideration.

Almost 60% of survey participants felt that Fort St. John had a network of safe pedestrian routes and pathways, and a similar number of respondents found that those pedestrian routes were accessible for people of all physical abilities. Respondents over 60 years of age were more likely to report being neutral, or disagreeing, that there were safe pedestrian routes in the community.

Opinions became more diverse, however, when we asked if there were safe bicycle routes. Although, roughly 37% agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, there were also about 35% who felt that safe bicycle routes were lacking in Fort St. John. Interestingly, a greater share of respondents between the ages of 25 and 49 years, reported disagreeing that there were safe bicycle routes in the community. In contrast, 46% of respondents found the road network to be safe and roughly half of all respondents considered Fort St. John roads efficient in supporting movement throughout the community. Overall, these perceptions point to bicycle routes as an area for added attention.

Transportation services are an important factor shaping the mobility and independence for residents of all ages and stages of life. Access to transportation not only connects people with social and recreational activities to support their well-being, but also enables people to commute to work and complete tasks that address their daily needs. Roughly 57% of survey participants maintained that Fort St. John had transportation options and support for persons with mobility challenges (Handi-Dart). Beyond the simple availability of public transportation, the efficiency of bus routes determines whether they provide access to all areas of the community on a timely basis. Just over one-quarter of respondents found the bus routes to be efficient and well-planned, while just under one-quarter expressed concerns. Roughly 15% had a neutral opinion on the matter. The largest group of around 34%, however, indicated they were not familiar with the topic. This result warrants some attention both in terms of reviewing the efficiency of bus routes as well as looking into the reason why a large share of the population appears to be unfamiliar with their public transportation options.

Furthermore, people were asked if there is effective drainage for roads in Fort St. John. Responses indicated a wide range of opinions. Just over 40% were satisfied with road drainage, while over one-third of the respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed. This left just over 20% who felt neutral about the issue.

6.4 Your Voice Fort St. John Survey Results: Air and water quality

Other environment attributes explored in the survey included air and water quality. Roughly 53% either agreed or strongly agreed that Fort St. John had good air quality. By comparison, just under one-quarter were concerned about the community's air quality, leaving less than 20% who felt more neutral about the issue. The opinions on water quality were even more positive with just under 70% indicating that there is good water quality in the community.

7. Community Facilities and Services

7.1 Introduction

Community facilities and services play a key role in quality of life. They help people find a way to pursue their interests and passions, to connect with other like-minded people, to develop skills and knowledge, and to find a sense of belonging. Therefore, they play a role in the outcomes in a number of the other topic areas explored in the survey. Knowing how residents feel about existing facilities and services can help future planning efforts to be responsive to community needs and priorities. An overview of residents' interests and opinions may also support strategic attention to ensure that future improvements and changes address as many needs and gaps as possible.

7.2 Your Voice Fort St. John Survey Results: Satisfaction with facilities and services

The community aspects survey respondents evaluated in this section included opportunities for a variety of recreation, leisure, and entertainment activities as well as, in many cases, the facilities to host such activities. In terms of strategic planning, input into these specific attributes of the community can help pinpoint concrete areas in need of attention or guide the general direction planning efforts should be aimed.

When asked to rate the arts and culture opportunities in Fort St. John, roughly 42% found them acceptable, while 20% felt such opportunities were very good or excellent. However, about 23% felt that opportunities in arts and culture were not very good or poor. The question about arts and culture facilities generated comparable results.

Special events garnered a positive response from survey respondents. Almost one-third of respondents rated special events as very good or excellent, an additional 45% found them acceptable, while 20% indicated they were not very good or poor. Recreational opportunities scored similarly, but around one-quarter of respondents still felt that recreational opportunities in Fort St. John needed attention. Roughly the same results were found in ratings of recreation facilities, with the largest group of over 40% finding them acceptable, around one-third rating them positively, and just over one-quarter seeing a need for improvements.

This section also gave respondents a chance to rate the green spaces in more detail than the Environment section. For example, survey participants were asked to rate parks in the community. Overall, 49% of survey respondents found park spaces to be acceptable, while roughly 28% deemed these spaces as either very good or excellent. The results for trails were very positive. While there were about 42% who rated local trails as acceptable, this was bolstered by an additional 38% who found them to be very good or excellent.

The next series of questions in this section explored perceptions of public facilities. The establishment and maintenance of public facilities can be costly for communities. At the same time, those facilities play an important role in quality of life and attraction and retention of residents. In the survey, people were asked to rate public library services in Fort St. John. Responses revealed very positive results. The most predominant group of respondents (73%) deemed the public library services to be acceptable to excellent. Interestingly, just over 20% of respondents reported that they did not know. These results may provide an incentive to expand communication of the highly valued library services to reach an ever bigger share of Fort St. John residents. The public museum received ratings comparable to the library with 63% rating it acceptable to excellent. Around one-fifth of the population indicated that they do not know, suggesting they may not yet be familiar with the facility. In all of the service and facility questions listed above, responses by those aged 55 years and older were more likely to be recorded as 'good'.

The survey also gauged satisfaction levels with public cemetery facilities. Overall, participants found cemetery facilities to be acceptable (32%), with a smaller group of roughly 20% rating such facilities as very good or excellent. However, more than 40% of respondents reported that they did not know.

When people were asked to rate the community's Visitor Information Centre, roughly one-third of respondents found the facility to be acceptable. There was an additional 29% who felt that the facility was very good or excellent. As with several other public facilities, a large share of respondents (24%) reported that they did not know.

Another key area that was explored concerned snow clearing. In northern communities, snow clearing can influence residents' mobility and quality of life through around six months of the year. It is also commonly a major expense in municipal budgets. Depending on different levels of experience with winter roads as well as personal priorities, opinions on snow clearing can traditionally span a wide range. For more than one-third of survey participants, snow clearing in Fort St. John was rated to be acceptable and more than 20% reported that it was very good to excellent. However, an additional 41% expressed concerns that snow clearing services were not very good or poor.

Another crucial area of community services are emergency and protection services. To start, people were asked to reflect on the quality of ambulance services. Overall, ambulance services were rated to be acceptable (27%). This was followed by just under 20% who felt that the community's ambulance services were very good to excellent. Of note, however, a large share of respondents (38%) reported that they did not know. Police services appeared more familiar, allowing more respondents to share their evaluation. Almost 40% of respondents rated them to be acceptable, with an additional roughly 28% reporting that police services in Fort St. John were very good or excellent. Fire services were one of the most highly rated services in Fort St.

John overall. Close to half of the respondents rated fire protection services to be either very good or excellent. This was further reinforced by about 29% who rated these services as acceptable. Interestingly, nearly 20% of respondents reported that they did not know. For all of these emergency services, respondents 70 years of age and older were more likely to report that the services were good or very good.

Lastly, people were asked to rate public transit services in Fort St. John. Overall, public transit services were deemed to be acceptable (30%); although, there was a secondary group of respondents (23%) who felt that that these services are not very good or poor. Like the earlier question about bus routing, it is clear that many respondents (32%) were not familiar with the public transit system as many reported that they simply did not know.

8. Our Community: Today and 5 Years Ago

8.1 Introduction

As the community moves forward, it is important to continue to monitor resident's opinions on a variety of factors related to quality of life. Exploring the community's perspective on how Fort St. John has changed over time provides insight into trends and trajectories around what is going well and where there are opportunities for improvement. As the intention is to repeat this survey every 2-3 years, these questions will provide a perspective around community change and insight into the impact of community initiatives. The information gathered in this section provides a benchmark to guide the next stage of community and economic development initiatives.

8.2 Your Voice Fort St. John Survey Results: Quality of life over time

Questions in this section of the survey explored general perceptions of the city, such as overall quality of life, friendliness, and attractiveness. More than half of the survey respondents felt that overall quality of life in Fort St. John had improved over the last five years, while about 18% were concerned that the quality of life was getting worse. Rating quality of life today, the largest group of respondents (45%) found the overall quality of life to be acceptable. A total of 35% deemed the quality of life to be very good or excellent, leaving just under 20% who feel that the quality of life is not very good or poor.

There are many qualities of a social environment that can shape a sense of community. One of those concerns the friendliness of its residents. Around 38% found the friendliness of residents today to be very good or excellent, and roughly 42% of respondents considered it acceptable. About one-quarter had seen improvements in friendliness over the last five years, and another 45% found it had not changed. Similar to overall quality of life, roughly 20% expressed concerns that the state of friendliness in Fort St. John had become a little or much worse.

Another quality of the city explored in this context was public perception about the physical attractiveness of Fort St. John. Despite 38% who found the physical attractiveness to be acceptable, roughly 48% felt the attractiveness was not very good or poor. On a positive note, however, just under 45% of respondents felt that the physical attractiveness of the community had recently improved.

About 50% of respondents found the community to be acceptable place to live, while with another nearly one-third of respondents rating Fort St. John as a very good or excellent place to live. One way to get a sense of the state of the city in terms of attraction and retention of people of different ages and stages in life is to explore how residents rate the community as a

place to raise a family and as a place to retire. One-third of respondents rated Fort St. John as a very good or excellent place to raise a family, and another 40% found it acceptable. Interestingly, respondents between 20 and 35 years of age were more likely to report that the community was acceptable, rather than very good or excellent, as a place to raise a family.

When we asked people to rate Fort St. John as a place to retire, public perceptions were less favourable. Just under two-thirds felt that the community was either not very good or a poor place to retire. Respondents aged 25 to 54 years of age were more likely to rate the community as a 'poor' place to retire, as were those who had lived for a long time in the community. Many resource-based communities like Fort St. John were designed to attract young workers and their families. Investments must continue to nurture the community as a place to retain retirees.

Furthermore, the survey asked how likely people would be to recommend Fort St. John to family and friends as a good place to live. Responses revealed varied opinions. For example, roughly 42% said they would be either likely or very likely to recommend Fort St. John as a place to live. By comparison, there were about 30% who felt they were unlikely or very unlikely to do so. This left about 25% who remained neutral about the issue.

9. Commitment to Build a Stronger Community

9.1 Introduction

At the end of the survey, we asked a question that invited participants to reflect on their commitment to the community and community engagement: “What will you do in the next year to build a stronger community in Fort St. John?” In response, people not only spoke about what they plan to do, but they also commented on issues that impeded their engagement. People also spoke about community improvements needed to make it more enticing to become engaged in various organizations and activities.

9.2 Your Voice Fort St. John Survey Results: Community commitment and suggestions

To start, people plan to be more engaged in the voluntary sector through volunteering or participating in community groups. In some cases, people talked about encouraging their children, other family members, or neighbours to be engaged in volunteering. In addition to offering their time, there were individuals who planned to donate to charities, assist charities to invest funds, and assist with fundraising events. People also planned to be more engaged in building the capacity of voluntary groups by mentoring leaders or through their participation on various boards of directors.

Secondly, respondents planned to be more engaged in civic activities and responsibilities. These activities largely revolved around voting, participating in community consultations, participating in the accountability of local government, and promoting the community to potential new residents.

A third theme concerned economic development initiatives. In this case, respondents looked forward to opening new businesses, hiring new staff, shopping more locally, and supporting the farmer’s market. Respondents also wanted to pursue activities to strengthen the business environment, such as improving customer service and engaging more small businesses in economic development discussions. Furthermore, there were also several suggestions to use economic development to create an environment that would be conducive for outings, social interaction, and community engagement. These largely focused on investments in more neighbourhood cafes, more restaurants, downtown beautification, and more retail shopping.

To further build a strong community, survey respondents expressed an interest in participating and promoting more community events. More events were also recommended for families, new immigrants, and to take advantage of the winter season.

There was also a strong interest to be engaged in more recreational activities and to use existing recreational facilities more. Some, however, felt that new investments were needed to foster more engagement through recreational opportunities. These largely focused on a greater diversity of indoor facilities to keep people active during the winter months. It also included recommendations to expand water-based recreational assets.

Another set of comments spoke to how the quality of the urban environment can entice people to get out more and visit certain spaces. In this theme of community planning, many comments expressed a desire to improve the beautification of the downtown area and community parks. There were also calls for more sidewalks and trails to encourage mobility and travel to different events and community sites. In a separate, but related, theme, people spoke about the ways they hoped to improve the quality of the environment by focusing on recycling, reducing waste, planting more trees, and cleaning up litter around the community.

Respondents also hoped to build a stronger sense of community by getting to know their neighbours, talking to other residents, and nurturing more inclusion. Creating a sense of community can also be shaped by resident behaviours, with many respondents striving to promote kindness, tolerance, and respect. Creating an inclusive and engaging community for youth was also important as respondents expressed an interest to volunteer and support more youth organizations. Some, however, also felt that the absence of an indoor play centre and spaces for teens was limiting the engagement of the younger generation in the community. Another group wanted to support greater inclusivity by fostering more support and tolerance for diversity in the community. In this case, people wished to provide more support for new immigrants and members of the LGBTQ2 community.

For the next year, there was also a group of respondents who plan to focus on advocating for important issues related to vulnerable residents and mobility.

Survey participants also felt it was important to ensure non-sporting opportunities were present throughout the year. In this context, a number of respondents were interested in participating in arts and culture activities and events. Others stated that they hope to use more local services and facilities in the community.

However, a number of barriers were raised that have impeded the ability of some to engage routinely with community events, organizations, and activities. Some were not sure how to find out about existing volunteer needs or opportunities. In terms of transportation, there is a need to foster mobility through improved snow removal, an expansion of bus stops and shelters, and expanding bus routes and weekend hours of operation. Other barriers included costs of events, limited childcare, and disabilities. Some advocated for new incentives, such as a volunteer appreciation night, to provide new motivation for people to become engaged in the community.

Conclusion

The details described in this report are based on the 1,020 returned surveys that were completed by Fort St. John residents. Most of those respondents were long time residents of the city. When they completed the survey, respondents provided information under the following topics: economy, education, services, community engagement, environment, facilities and services, and community change.

Responses under the economy topic suggested that while Fort St. John respondents felt the community have a strong economy, there were concerns about the diversity of that economy. Given that there are a number of important economic sectors, opportunities would seem to exist to strengthen existing sectors, build from that strength to diversify across sectors, and to add entirely new sectors where opportunities exist.

Responses under the topic of education suggests there is access to a solid base of services in the K-12 school system, workforce training and retraining, and post secondary education. However, satisfaction levels were not especially high and there are clearly opportunities to enhance educational services building from the program and facility base that already exists.

The topic of community and social services highlights the need for attention to ongoing communication and awareness building about the range and scope of services already available within the community. For many of the questions in this section, the largest response category was 'do not know'. Such services play a critical role in local quality-of-life and the more people know about the range of supports that are available, the more that will enhance that quality of life for all residents. Given the growing number of the older residents in the community, some initial attention to housing and support services for older residents is something that will need early attention. Additionally, attention to services for newcomers and the growing Indigenous population are also areas that need early attention.

The topic of health services also highlighted the need for attention to ongoing communication and awareness-building about the range and scope of services already available within the community. It also highlighted the clear need for attention to service provision across the range of services listed. This is an area for increased advocacy by the City and increased investment by Northern Health.

Under the topic of community engagement, respondents sketched a portrait of a community with strong voluntary groups and an openness to participation. They also described a municipal decision-making environment that encourages people to get involved and groups to take action on issues and opportunities. Also highlighted was a need to support opportunities for increasing the engagement of both youth and older residents in the community, and for supporting relationship-building within neighborhoods, between different generations, and connecting with newcomers.

Under the topic of environment, survey respondents generally felt a strong connection to the natural environment and green spaces within the city. Some areas of attention include weed control, enhancing community gardens, and air quality. In terms of neighbourhood environments, respondents generally felt them to be safe but not well designed for access to services and amenities. In terms of non-vehicle routes and pathways throughout the city, respondents had concerns about safe bicycle routes. In terms of public transportation, the largest share of respondents indicated that they were simply not familiar with the topic. Again, communication and awareness building can focus on the different transportation options in the city.

Community facilities and services in Fort St. John are generally rated a very high. That said, there are up to one-third of respondents who cited the need for improvements in some aspects of the services or facilities. One concern is that close to one-quarter of respondents did not appear to be familiar with important community facilities such as the visitor information center, the public library, and the museum. In addition to highlighting areas for potential investment, the results reinforce the need for ongoing communication and awareness-building.

The topic of community change, especially change over last five years, highlighted support for Fort St. John as a place with a good quality of life, and a good place to live and raise a family. Certainly, areas of needed investment were identified; including those focused upon improving Fort St. John has a good place to retire. Other investment areas focused upon enhancing the physical attractiveness of the city.

A final part of the survey asked people what they would do over the next year to help enhance the quality of life in the city. Respondents were very generous with their suggestions. Among the key avenues is simply greater participation in the city and its community life, and greater commitment to enhancing social and economic relationships.

Taken together, the results of the survey provide a baseline for evaluating progress around future community and economic development initiatives. It also provides guidance to areas of community development strength, and to areas where further investments are needed. Creating a community that is inclusive, active, and engages people across cultures and ages is a unifying theme. As shown by their participation in the survey, residents are not only willing to bring forward ideas, but also willing to bring their own commitments of time and energy to creating the future Fort St. John.